

18 August 1965

MEMORANDUM

Status of Soviet and Cuban Forces in Cuba

1. The Cuban armed forces are by far the best equipped in Latin America and, except for Brazil's, the largest. Personnel strength may total 100,000 men on active duty, with somewhat fewer in the ready reserve and perhaps an equal number in a home guard or militia called the Popular Defense Force. The Cuban armed forces are equipped largely with Soviet bloc weapons. A relatively small group of Soviet citizens remains on the island, probably in an aid and advisory role.

2. The Cuban military force is basically defensive in nature. The armed forces are believed capable of quelling any foreseeable internal uprising or externally launched attack, aside from a full-scale invasion. The personal loyalty to Castro of the top military leaders is not questioned, although the loyalty and devotion of the ranks probably mirror the range of attitude of the masses of the Cuban people. An extensive program of political indoctrination is now under way in the military and the regime is making a major effort to establish military cells of its official organ, the United Party of the Socialist Revolution (PURS). In the long run, these efforts may increase the dedication of the Cuban enlisted man to the person of Fidel Castro and the Communist system he has established in Cuba.

3. Traditionally, the Cuban army has been the largest element in the armed forces. The air force, responsible for all air defense, is probably most dependent on Soviet training and equipment.* The navy is the smallest military branch and has a mission devoted solely to coastal defense. It has probably suffered more defections than any other arm of the military.

*On 19 June, by Cuban admission, "anti-aircraft elements" accidentally destroyed a Cuban aircraft.

4. The number of Soviet personnel in Cuba today is extremely difficult to document. There is no question that there has been a massive departure since the high of perhaps 22,000 reached in late 1962. The remaining Soviets, perhaps 2,000 or so, are not formed into combat units but are scattered throughout various Cuban military units, probably including the surface-to-air missile (SAM) system. The function of these troops most likely is equivalent to that of a US MAAG group.

5. Included in the Cuban military arsenal is a large variety of Soviet-supplied missiles, aircraft, and weapons, some of which began to arrive in 1960. The USSR is continuing to ship limited quantities of military equipment to Cuba but these deliveries are probably designed to maintain Cuban military stocks, rather than to introduce new types or substantially larger quantities.

6. Cuban missile holdings include: approximately 24 surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites, complete with the necessary missiles and associated equipment, which are capable of engaging targets up to 80,000 feet with a slant range of about 25 miles; some short range ground-to-ground tactical missiles; a limited number of coastal defense cruise missiles with an estimated maximum range of about 40 miles; and coastal patrol boats of the KOMAR class, each equipped with two short-range-missile launchers. Despite occasional refugee and press reports to the contrary, there is no convincing evidence of the presence in Cuba of any medium range or intermediate range missiles.

7. Cuba's conventional weapons holdings include over 100 Soviet-built MIG fighters, including the supersonic MIG-21; military transport planes; helicopters; tanks; subchasers, and motor torpedo boats. Weapons include a large number of anti-aircraft guns and the normal variety of standard ~~artillery~~ artillery, small arms, and ammunition. Military equipment is believed to be adequate to the needs of the Cuban military establishment. Additional arms, of unknown amount and doubtful reliability, will be accrued to the military in the wake of a 13 August government decree that civilians and military personnel without proper authorization must turn in all "combat weapons." These are defined as hand grenades, rifles, repeating rifles, machineguns, carbines, and sub-machine guns.

8. The level of training of the Cuban military is constantly being improved, both through formal training in the USSR and Cuba and through normal training exercises which are held periodically for different elements of the Cuban military. The regime also has been able to provide actual field experience through large-scale counterinsurgent operations, designed to flush out and destroy the few remaining counterrevolutionary elements which have operated out of Cuba's extensive mountainous areas.

9. The readiness and capability of the Cuban military has not received a major test. However, a measure of its general effectiveness can be inferred from its speed and efficiency in countering scattered internal- and external-based anti-regime operations. Such operations are usually conducted or coordinated by specialized military elements called the LCB (Struggle Against "Bandits") and LCP (Struggle Against "Pirates"). In June 1964, a plane piloted by exiles was downed as it attempted to bomb a Cuban sugar mill. In January 1963, the LCB and the regular military combined to track down and capture a major exile leader who headed an apparently well-planned, four-man infiltration of the island.

10. The numerical strength of the Cuban armed forces is assured by the institution in December 1963 of a system of compulsory military service for all Cuban males between the ages of 17 and 43. For a period of three years, all inductees--approximately 28,000 per year--will participate in full or part-time military service. They will provide the basis for a trained, ready reserve of the future. This system has provided the regime with the side benefits of providing cheap labor (draftees also are used to cut sugar cane and engage in other productive labor), establishing a much-needed pool of technically trained personnel, and providing the regime with a systematic check on the whereabouts of its draft-age males.

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